

Tramps

No. 16 ORIGINAL MSS. OR FIELD NOTES (Check one) PUB. Living Lore in New England (Connecticut) TITLE Connecticut Clockmaker (Tramps) (Botsford) WRITER Francis Donovan DATE [12/31/38?] WDS. PP. 4 CHECKER DATE SOURCES GIVEN (?) Interview COMMENTS

W15086 "Living Lore" Series Francis Donovan, Thomaston Conn. December 31, 1938
TRAMPS * * Mr. Botsford has some "tradin' to do" and it is obvious that I have called at an inopportune moment, but he says he can spare some time and wants to know "what's on your mind." I ask him about unemployment in the old days.

"Wasn't any, to speak of," he says," except during the panic, and durin' the hard times that came every once in a while. They wasn't any long drawn out depressions. A man wasn't out of work for more than a month or so at the most.

'Course there was always a few paupers that couldn't or wouldn't work, and there was tramps, same as they was today, that would rather lead a rovin' life than stay in one place.

"I never told you about, some of the tramps we used to have, did I? The ones that came to be well known around here were all odd characters. I suppose you might say some of them weren't right, though that's matter of opinion. Maybe they was smarter than folks who looked down on them. Maybe they got more satisfaction out of life in their own way than some who were better off.

"We had a number of them that used to come through this way periodically. I guess the most famous of them all was the old Leather Man. He's been written up in books and magazines and I guess he's known all over the country. He had a regular round of travel and he used to hit this section every so often.

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"I can't tell you a great deal about him, but I see him two - three times. I had a picture of him here, somewhere. (Mr. Botsford conducts an unsuccessful search for the picture).

"Too bad I 2 can't find it. It was taken by somebody who found the Leatherman sittin' on a stone wall, munchin' somethin'.

"He used to dress all in leather, that's how he got the name, his clothes were patched and sewed all over with big leather strips and he wore a leather cap. He used to stay in caves. He had a regular route, like I said, and he knew where there were caves all over this state and New York and Massachusetts. He wandered around in kind of a big circle. There was one of his caves over beyond Bidwell's hill --they call it Leatherman's cave to this day.

Maybe you've seen it yourself.

"They had all kinds of stories about the Leatherman, but nobody ever found out if they was true or not. Some said he had been crossed in love and vowed never to talk again. He never said nothin' to nobody. Most likely he was a dummy. They said his name was Jules, and that he was a Frenchman, came from a good family. The Leatherman never gave out any information. If he had a secret he took it with him. They found him dead somewheres, one time, if I remember rightly.

"There was another feller who came around for years, they used to call 'Hash and Coffee,' He used to go in the basement of Aaron Thomas' house and they'd give him coffee, then he'd go up to Woodward's up near the Catholic church and they'd give him hash.

"Another one that I remember was Johnny O' the Woods. He was like the rest of them. Never said much of anything. Never molested anybody. Always had certain places to stop. And he always wore two overcoats.

"When I was five or six years old, I remember, the queerest one of all used to come around. She was a little short Irishwoman 3 they used to call Aunt Jane. She always came

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to our house. She'd always get a cup of tea and something to eat and the women liked to see her comin' because she was a great talker.

"Her son came to this country when he was a young feller and she never heard from him again. So she came over here to look for him. She thought this country was about as big as Ireland, and she never realized what a job it would be to find anybody like that.

"When she came in, she'd tell the whole story, and describe him, and ask if anybody had seen him. She walked from town to town for years, and I don't know what finally did become of her. She used to travel in a circle too, and to the end of her days I don't think she ever knew the size of the country. She never found her son anyway.

"I guess every country has their characters like that. I read about one called the Red Snake, down in Australia. This feller killed a snake and brought it home and hung it up. He went away from the house again, and the mate to that snake follered his trail in the meantime, and come in the house and killed his wife and child. When he come home and found them, he went kind of crazy. He went out and started looking for that snake, traveled all over Australia killing every snake he saw. That's the way he spent his life. Just travelin' from one place to the other, beggin' his food and killin' snakes.

"You know there's somethin' about that kind of a life that some people can't resist. Once they start trampin' they're never no good for nothin' else. That's why you'll always have tramps. Some people have that urge, but they fight it.

"There was a feller herein town years ago used to be a painter. In his spare time he used to walk all over the back 4 roads. Me and my father used to meet him all over the county when we was out drivin'. I suppose people who seen that feller trampin' along would think he was a regular hobo. And maybe he woulda been, if he'd follered his inclinations.

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"Well I'd never make a tramp, because I don't care enough about walkin'. I'm going downtown now, but I'm not goin' to walk. You want a lift? * * *